



Representative Steve Kirby

29th District

Olympia office:

308 John L. O'Brien Bldg.
P.O. Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

Phone:

360-786-7996

Toll-free Legislative Hotline:

1-800-562-6000

TDD (for hearing impaired):

1-800-365-9993

E-mail:

kirby_st@leg.wa.gov

Committees:

Capital Budget
Judiciary
Technology, Telecommuni-
cations & Energy
Rules



What happens to the current gas tax money?

The current 23¢ gas tax generates about \$732 million for fiscal year 2003. Of that, only \$383 million goes to the State Department of Transportation. That seems like a lot of money until you consider that they are responsible for 7,048 miles of state highways, 3,367 overpasses, bridges, tunnels and culverts, as well as 29 ferries. In fact, only \$240 million goes to maintaining that entire infrastructure. The remaining \$143 million goes toward paying off debt that was incurred to construct much of it in the first place. It's not unlike a family budget that includes a certain amount of ongoing money for day to day things, and some money for paying off debt that was incurred for big ticket things like the house, the car, and major household appliances.

The other \$349 million gets divided up among the 39 counties and 281 cities all over the state for local transportation improvements and maintenance of arterial streets, sidewalks, traffic signals and such.

None of the gas tax goes to fund Pierce Transit and none of it goes to Sound Transit (and none of it goes to me, personally).

Is a gas tax increase needed?

About half the correspondence I receive is in opposition to an increase and the other half supports it if it's not too big, and if it will really help improve the system. Most of the opposition comes from folks who are fundamentally opposed to any increase in taxes in these tough economic times. That's a legitimate position of which I am constantly mindful.

Those who support the increase are concerned that the existing revenue is just plain inadequate to fund the system given the increase in population and traffic that has occurred since the last time the gas tax was raised in 1991. With almost 6 million registered vehicles in this state alone, plus the fact that much of our infrastructure is sorely outdated and incapable of handling the sheer volume, they argue that our tax revenue has not kept up with the demand.

That's hard to dispute. Try driving just about anywhere during rush hour and you'll see severe traffic congestion in places where it just didn't exist several years ago. We're spending time stuck in traffic that we could be spending with our families, our kids' activities, our yards, our church and community organizations or reading legislators' newsletters. It's getting so hard to move freight that businesses are seriously contemplating leaving the state.

What's going to happen?

The Republicans in the House and Senate are pushing for a 5¢ per gallon increase. The House Democrats proposed a more modest 3¢ increase. In an effort to accommodate the House Republicans, we attempted a compromise and passed a 4¢ increase phased in at a penny a year. Each penny increase will cost 50¢ per month for a person who drives 1,000 miles each month at 20 miles per gallon. By the same token each penny increase will create approximately 3,000 jobs. The package will provide \$3 billion to badly needed safety improvements and congestion relief in Washington. The compromise didn't work. Only a couple of the Republicans voted for it. Some are still pushing for that extra penny. Nothing happens unless and until both sides agree.

We have to remove the partisan gridlock in Olympia before we can address the traffic gridlock at home. Stay tuned.....

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